

# Culture Change and Christianity in Africa<sup>1</sup>

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The Christianization of whole African societies in the 20th century is not only one of the major shifts in the history of religions, it also constitutes a phenomenon of cultural change that deserves a thorough analysis in its own right. For a number of years now, anthropologists have found interest in the outcome of this development, i.e., cultures in which the influence of various versions of Christianity is of decisive importance (cf., e.g., Maxwell 1999; Wijzen and Tanner 2000; Green 2003). Moreover, the influence of these “Christianities” on many African societies has become an issue even in political studies (cf., e.g., Gifford 1995 and 1998; Ranger 2008). Clearly Christian churches and movements have become major players in the cultures and societies of the continent, which necessitates inquiry from various academic perspectives.

Still, the very tendency of academic disciplines to focus on their particular interests and to observe subject matters in the framework of their particular discourses often leads to undue simplifications. They need to be addressed when a phenomenon is discussed that belongs to different scholarly fields. The literature related to African Christian views of, and responses to, culture change is a notable example of this problem: one can still find treatises mentioning “African culture” as if such a culture with some unifying traits ever existed. Scholars of all fields—including the author—habitually speak about “African Christianity” as if there were an obvious common ground on which these faithful stand other than the soil of the continent and their confession of Jesus as Lord and Saviour. What is more, the tradition that views “the missionaries” as the destroyers of, or at least intruders into, “traditional cultures” is still a common idea when the history of African churches is debated. However, it is now also widely acknowledged that “traditional cultures” are, at least to some degree, constructs of later periods; the caveat to be derived from this observation also applies when one talks about common characteristics of those who served as importers of religion to some part of the African continent and about those who accepted this religion and, at the same time, modified it.

In presenting a classification of Christian attitudes toward culture change in Africa, this essay aims at elucidating the diversity of attitudes in the many Christian movements meeting widely different societies with their respective cultures, all of which were more or less dynamic. But dynamic they were; therefore, it is important to

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<sup>1</sup> Professor Pfeiffer’s publications and teaching demonstrate a keen interest in the way religious change in Africa related to social and cultural change. In his historiographical approach, the anthropological perspective was always taken into account, and in his present work of supporting research in Africa, he contributes to change himself. It is with these concerns in mind and with deep respect to one of my most important teachers that I dedicate the following deliberations to him.

realize that culture change was not a new phenomenon when colonial rulers, emissaries of Christian churches, and adventurers and traders of all sorts swept the continent—it had already been there before.

Of course, the parameters of change *did* change in the period when Christianity made its strongest impact on African societies in the late 19th and 20th centuries. Different from the endogenous dynamics of innovation and adaptation to nature, a major *cause* of change was evidently the contact and interaction of different cultures, in this case some “traditional culture” and elements of some imported culture, with the well-known mechanisms of diffusion and acculturation working out different compromises. The *speed* of change was probably the most notable change in the way cultures changed; due to the presence of two very different worlds in the same space, transformations could work out more rapidly than in previous eras. Connected with this, the *degree* of change shifted from little or next to no alterations to upheavals in the very foundations of societies.

Each of these parameters would justify a major study of its own, as is the case for the *direction* (e.g., did the 20th century bring more individuality to particular African societies?), or the *visibility* and *homogeneity* of cultural change. This essay, however, deals with the *acceptance* of change. Societies and cultures were transformed, but the *desirability* of these evolutions were subject to debate. Christianity, as a bundle of phenomena and an assortment of discourses, provided a framework for the discussion of this desirability and led to diverging conclusions regarding the acceptability of change. Still, the fact that these different Christian attitudes were derived from a common basis—the faith in the God who revealed himself in Jesus Christ, and the witness about him in the Scriptures—implies that one is dealing with a subject matter that must be treated as a whole.

The following classification does not only present different Christian attitudes towards cultural change in Africa but also aims at evaluating them; each of the positions has to be appreciated in its own right. In fact, this overview of African Christian positions vis-à-vis culture change may also be applicable to Christianity in general, and one may find similar attitudes toward culture change derived from other religious or non-religious foundations. Thus, it is also intended to be a contribution to the broader discourse on culture change (cf. Bee 1974; Boyd and Richerson 1985; Bühl 1987; Sanderson 1995; Johnson and Eerle 2000).

The options for African Christians vis-à-vis culture change were (1) and (2) two attitudes of seemingly favouring modern culture, (3) and (4) two attitudes of favouring “traditional culture,” and (5) and (6) two attitudes favouring none of them. In each of these categories, the following classification distinguishes between a strict version and a more lenient version.

## 1. Destruction of “Traditional Culture”

The radical version of a pro-modern bias is a *total rejection* of “traditional culture” and its manifestations. Consequently, Christianity is viewed as an *agent* of change, as

a hammer that destroys whatever is opposed to the new culture brought by its representatives. As tools of change, Christians may attempt to wipe out elements of traditional culture physically, as in the case of holy groves or idols. But iconoclasm also worked through ridicule or by branding traditional culture “satanic” or “barbaric”.

The stereotype that African Christianity in the first half of the 20th century, especially its missionary-initiated type, embodied this approach to cultures was widespread in a certain type of historiography which focused on the interaction or, for that matter, the deficient interaction, of Western missionaries with Africans. A.J. Temu, for instance, asserts that “almost all the Protestant missionaries to Kenya viewed all native customs and tradition with abhorrence” (Temu 1972, 9). Thomas Beidelman likewise declares, “The most poignant and destructive aspect of evangelism in Africa was the missionaries’ failure to appreciate fully the integrated quality of traditional African life” (Beidelman 1982, 25).

This is a rather one-sided reading of the evolving Christian story in some parts of Africa—not so much because it is completely wrong but because it focuses on the missionary side and thus indirectly deemphasizes actual African Christian life. Yet it is most remarkable that there were African Christians who actually adopted a rhetoric that sounded very similar to the attitudes that Temu and Beidelman condemned. For them, “traditional culture,” or rather “customs” signified the very essence of what Christians were supposed to reject—not because they had been told so by missionaries but because they wanted to be fully Christian, at times even more fully so than those who had brought the Christian message to them from Europe or North America. In other words, to them the destruction of “traditional culture” was a necessity. Two movements fittingly illustrate this stand: the *Balokole* of the 1930s and 1940s and the Pentecostals/Charismatics of the 1990s.

The *Balokole* [“saved ones”] Movement was a revival that spread from Anglicans in Rwanda, where it had started in the early 1930s, to Uganda and various Protestant denominations in Kenya and Tanzania. It made a strong impact especially in Uganda and among the Haya of north-west Tanzania in the late 1930s and throughout the 1940s (cf. Robins 1975; Sundkler 1980, 113–135). They rejected bridewealth (a custom that almost all other African Christians continued in their respective societies), traditional food taboos and other taboos which had not basis in the Christian faith, and obviously stood in strongest opposition to such traditionalist revitalization movements as Mau Mau in Kenya during the 1950s.

Adrian Hastings is correct when he points out that the *Balokole* were

above all, anti-traditionalist. While African theologians of the 1960s castigated missionaries for being so intolerant of African custom in what they required of the first generation of Christians, the *Balokole* castigated the same generation for their tolerance in accommodating the unchristian (1994, 598–599).

It is interesting that the Pentecostal and Charismatic Movements are linked to the *Balokole* not only by the nature of their revivalistic religion but also through the term *Walokole*, a Swahili form of the name, which is today applied to Pentecostals and Charismatics in East Africa. Pentecostals and Charismatics, especially those in

Africa, enjoy steadily increasing academic attention since the 1990s (cf. Meyer 2004), and part of the discussion about their significance in the continent has been their dealing with “traditional culture”—which, as should be emphasized once more, is often a construct of a pre-Christian tradition, a scheme serving as a dark background of an imagined bright present.

Birgit Meyer has aptly analysed such discourses on the past with which are used by Pentecostal/Charismatic Christians to affirm that they intend to “make a complete break with the past” (Meyer 1998) and try to adopt modernity—not in a process of secularization but through a demonization (one could also say, a *mental* destruction) of “tradition” (Meyer 1999). Ironically, such Pentecostal/Charismatic varieties of Christianity, while professing to reject “tradition,” are significantly more similar to traditional religions in some respects than mainline Protestant versions. Still, the rhetoric of a rejection of “tradition” is significant, for it constitutes one way of “modernization,” an option for a “modern culture” which was conceptualized as diametrically opposed to the culture of the past.

## 2. Desertion of “Traditional Culture”

A softer version of the pro-modern tendency in African Christianity is the *abandonment* of “traditional culture.” Here Christianity is viewed as an *aide* of change, as a bridge (cf. Shaw 1996, 235) that helps members of traditional society travel the way to an enlightened way of life. Opposition to tradition is not so much a matter of spiritual principle but a result of intelligent choice; the old is not to be fought but is considered as “outdated,” “uncivilized,” or “deficient.”<sup>2</sup>

During most of the 19th century, this was the standard model of both the missionary attitude and African Christian identity. When Hastings speaks of the “missionary fixation with civilization” of the epoch (1994, 282), he is undoubtedly right. But even in the first half of the 20th century the majority of Western heralds of the Christian faith as well as African Christians—who then belonged to what would today be called “mainline” churches—operated with the premise of a marriage of “Christianity and Civilization.”

In an account of the interplay between these motifs, one could focus on the school as the medium of transferring Western concepts to more or less remote villages. Certainly the Christian school work in Africa during the 20th century has been the one most important aspect of both Christianization and the dimension of cultural change that was, in that era, labelled “civilization.” The fact that 96.4% of all pupils were found in mission schools—mostly Protestant schools—in the British parts of Africa in 1945 is probably unique in human history. So much was this line of

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<sup>2</sup>This view corresponds to Richebächer’s “soteriological-functional” type of the relationship between African Traditional Religion and Christianity. Richebächer distinguishes five theological views of the relationship of African Traditional Religion and Christianity: (1) conservative-catalytic, (2) salvation historical-complementary, (3) metaphysical-abstract, (4) eschatological-revising, and (5) soteriological-functional. See Richebächer 2002, 208–210.

activity important that the Roman Catholic Archbishop Hinsley gave a directive in 1930 to give preference to the building of schools over the building of churches! (Baur 1998, 413) It is probably not exaggerated when the period is characterized as an age when the “gospel of education” was a central tenet of Christian identity and activities in much of Africa (ibid., 313). Naturally, this option of deserting the old culture was much more irenic towards traditional religions; different from the radical first attitude vis-à-vis culture change, this school Christianity aimed at “transformation rather than destruction” (ibid., 151).

Still, the school story was only one part of the larger picture. There is hardly a better succinct summary of the feelings in the era regarding the complex of “Christianity, Civilization and Commerce” than the chapter in Hastings’s church history of Africa (1994, 282–293). Hastings traces the concept of a close connection between Christianity and the second motif, and at times all three, back to mission concepts present in Northern European ventures in the Middle Ages and Portuguese missionary schemes in the 16th century. However, the 18th Protestant century missionary movement had surprisingly little concern with civilization; only in the 19th century was a fusion between the two strands of thinking made, and subsequently “Civilization and Christianity”—often in this order—became a standard catchphrase. Interestingly, what exactly constituted “civilization” always remained debated. Was it primarily reading and writing, was justice part of the parcel, did it mean training for commercial activities, was higher education important or dangerous?

With this diversity of civilization concepts, it is a remarkable fact that the notion that Christianity is “modern” persists in many parts of Africa even today. After the overwhelming success of Christianization in many regions even after political independence, Christians naturally dominate the public discourse. This leads to the common assumption that there are respectable, modern religions—Christianity and Islam—and “backward,” “superstitious” types of faith, which may not even be called “religion.” In East Africa, for instance, *dini* (“religion”) is commonly not used for traditional religions, and traditionalists are viewed by others as having “no religion at all.” To be Christian means to be civilized, and to be civilized means that one should belong to a world religion.

### 3. Protection of “Traditional Culture”

While the activities of the Christian mainstream at times seemed to “civilize” more than to convert hearts to Christ, a distinct group of opponents of this standard concept of African Christian identity in changing cultures can be discerned. Interestingly, they are found both on the side of African Christians themselves and among the missionaries.

Again, there were radical versions of this attitude, which seemed to *completely reject* “modernity” and its manifestations. In such varieties of faith, Christianity was viewed as an *adversary* of cultural change, as a shield which guards against whatever

is opposed to the extant culture. A particular “traditional culture” was either viewed as *superior* to “modern culture” and therefore deemed as worthy of being defended or as *more appropriate* to a particular group and therefore a candidate for protection. One of the most prominent representatives of a culture-conserving approach was the missionary Bruno Gutmann, who offered perhaps the most influential voice of any German missionary in the first half of the twentieth century (Hoekendijk 1967; Winter 1979). Gutmann’s principal missiological concern was the church’s folk identity in a local African society; to him, modern civilization was the archenemy of all human social life (Gutmann 1966; 1928, 65–70). He was persuaded that man is not to be addressed as an individual, but as a part of an organic whole, as a person who lives embedded in what he regarded as constituting elements of traditional life, the “primal ties” of age group, clan, and neighbourhood (Gutmann 1931, 26–41 and 87–104; Jaeschke 1985, 18). It has been noted, however, that traditional religion and sin are virtually absent as threats to Christian identity in Gutmann’s thinking (Hassing 1979, 70). Thus, he adhered to a romantic view of traditional culture, which even caused clashes with the very Chagga whom he served, because their leaders *did* value cultural change in instances when he wanted to preserve the old or elements that he considered to be proper Chagga “traditional culture.” On the African side, many African Instituted Churches are to be counted as representatives of “traditional culture” protection. Together with some movements falling into Turner’s category “Neo-Pagan and Hebraist religious movements” (1967, 6–10), several religious groups which are situated at the periphery of Christianity because of their beliefs or practices—such as the AmaNazaretha in South Africa and the Kimbanguists in Central Africa—may be viewed as results of attempts at protecting tradition in periods of overwhelming cultural change. In addition, many of the movements commonly classified as “Spiritual/Prophet-Healing Churches” (cf. Anderson 2001, 109–110) such as the Aladura churches of West Africa or the Zionists of South Africa with their enthusiastic type of worship, their use of symbolic objects, their adoption of taboos, and, partly, the toleration of polygyny, represent the Christian struggle against culture change. Thus, they may be considered a religious mode of rejecting modernity and shielding tradition.

#### 4. Mitigation of “Modern Culture”

If some types of African Christian independency are to be viewed as embodiments of a definite rejection of culture change, there are also types of mainstream Christianity that shared the same concern while leading to less pronounced effects. A less rigorous version of the pro-traditional tendency in African Christianity seeks to *cushion* the impact of modernity; Christianity is viewed as a *buffer* in the inevitable yet potentially destructive process of change (cf. Shaw 1996, 235). The variety of Christian faith envisioned in this attitude helps members of traditional society to remain authentic while some inescapable modifications happen in society. Opposi-

tion to modernity is not so much a matter of unbending principle as a reaction to the irritations and inconsistencies that culture change always entails.

Both African Christians and some missionaries often found themselves to be citizens of two worlds—traditional life with its values on the one side and the colonial realities with the changes they brought on the other. Being representatives of a new way of life and yet members of the old world, they had the unique ability to buffer the impact of societal changes and to adapt them carefully according to their own needs. Modernity was not rejected as such, but its elements were carefully screened. Thus, unique patchworks developed which were not always visibly different from the “civilization” versions of African Christianity yet contained the clearly pronounced tendency to give preference to the old. Innovations perceived as threats to valuable aspects of traditional life were thus resisted.

Several fine examples for this approach to culture change may be obtained in Klaus Fiedler’s treatise *Christianity and African Culture* (1996). In addition to Gutmann, he lists several cases of experiments that tried to uphold tradition in an environment of noticeable cultural change. Two such examples should suffice to illustrate the principle. In Uzaramo, Tanzania, the traditional seclusion of girls who had not reached marriageable age was christianized by the Lutherans in the region and combined with education. This move was well accepted by society because it demonstrated that the new faith was respectable and thus compatible with central values of society. Among the Yao in the south of the country, Anglicans under the leadership of Bishop Vincent Lucas christianized male initiation, including circumcision, accompanying teachings, and most customs connected with the ceremony. This experiment was so much accepted in society that even traditionalist and Muslim youth participated in it; the ceremony was apparently cheaper and safer, and fully matched the expectations of traditional society. These experiments and the concomitant approaches to cultural change did not rise to a fame comparable to Gutmann and African Instituted Churches; still, they were effective in reducing the intensity of potentially severe culture clashes.

## 5. Rejection of Both Cultures

The fifth position is perhaps the easiest to describe, for it involves a thorough rejection of both traditional and modern cultures—i.e., of expressions and central dimensions of what the proponents of this stand consider to be at their heart. Here, Christianity is viewed as a *bulwark* in an ever-changing world, as a fortress to host those who agree to be enemies of the world and society, whatever its shape. It is not difficult to see that this attitude to culture change corresponds to the position that Niebuhr called “Christ against culture” (Niebuhr 1952, 45–82); where the world is rejected, it does not make a difference whether there is culture change or how much of it is going on.

Again, two cases shall exemplify the principle. On the missionary side, some faith missions tried to follow Hudson Taylor’s lead in China to establish Christian

centres which spread the gospel without building institutions. At Lake Victoria in East Africa, the Africa Inland Mission conducted almost purely evangelistic work before World War I (Höschele 2007, 59, 98). Understandably, this strategy did not work very well, and before long, schools became part of the mission's programme. Evidently in a situation of changing culture it made sense to identify with either or both cultural complexes, but not with none.

Still, the rejection of society coupled with a critical attitude towards all culture remained an option for some African Christians and led to remarkable results. A case in point are the Jehovah's Witnesses. Although they still have their largest numbers in Europe and North America, the Witnesses now count more than half a million adherents in Nigeria, Zambia, and the Democratic Republic of Congo. A study on the Kenyan segment of this religious group describes the dynamics connected with their general culture-critical stance:

The Witnesses have never contributed to general educational development: nor do they run hospitals or social welfare agencies... [Yet] it would be an error to discount the social effects of the movement. They do inculcate a very rigorous ethic of personal integrity... Thus standards are disseminated and a type of social consciousness is encouraged which may—in the long run—be of more social significance than the founding and running of specific welfare institutions (Wilson 1974, 148–149).

Wilson proceeds to marvel about the fact that “In refusing to take bribes, an African Jehovah's Witness manifests a standard of behaviour quite uncommon in African countries” and suggests that the Witnesses are “an effective agency” for the diffusion of values needed in the economic development of the continent. Wilson's analysis is supported by a study in Zambia which compares Jehovah's Witnesses and Seventh-day Adventists. Interestingly, the Witnesses are assessed as being significantly more successful in the “the restructuring of behaviour”—i.e., in making their adherents faithful husbands and generally well-behaved persons (Poewe 1978, 314). This is somewhat surprising, for Adventists are also known as a somewhat strict religious movement. However, the Witnesses' success is certainly a logical consequence of a rejection of “worldly” values, even as these values change amidst the general transformation of culture. The persuasion that all human culture is depraved corresponded to the development of a type of Christianity that constituted—at least to some extent—a culture of its own.

## 6. Amalgamation of “Traditional” with “Modern Culture”

A last position with regard to culture change is the impartial adoption of both the old and the new. Instead of rejecting both cultures, here an eclectic approach to tradition and modernity is chosen. Metaphors such as merger, mixture, or amalgamation describe to what such a stance leads; in a way, the inevitable is made a virtue, for the hybrid nature of culture is taken so serious that Christianity is conceptualized as a melting pot of some sort, an ever-changing *culture* in the midst of changing cultures. While the previous model, the fortress which rejects

everything around, is the most idealistic version of Christianity, this appears to be the most realistic one. This attitude prevailed among those who mainly enjoyed Christianity for its extra-religious benefits and among those who sincerely strove to reconcile the good of both tradition and modernity.

The dynamics of amalgamation may be observed in a variety of phenomena. Steven Kaplan (1986) has described several of them, and his typology is worth recounting. He distinguishes the following approaches to “The Africanization of Missionary Christianity”—an issue that one may also translate as “the merger of modernity and tradition in mission-initiated churches”: toleration, translation, assimilation, christianization, acculturation, and incorporation. Of these, the following are most relevant for this section:

(1) *Toleration*: As an example, Kaplan mentions polygamy, which was rejected in theory by most denominations, but was often silently tolerated because of its widespread occurrence. Twenty years after Kaplan’s typology, there are also interesting works that focus precisely on toleration, e.g., of African Christians’ use of traditional healing devices and specialists, initiation rituals, beliefs in ancestral spirits, birth rituals, traditional funerals, rain rituals, and the like. Bregje de Kok’s study (2004) on Malawian Christians’ involvement in Traditional Religion, for instance, is most enlightening regarding the extent to which Christians amalgamate “traditional,” Christian, and “modern” concepts.

(2) *Translation*: While the linguistic work involved in communicating Christian concepts, beliefs, and terms such as “Holy Spirit” or “Christ” was already a great challenge, the general necessity to render meaning across culture in the context of culture change was probably the crucial locus of amalgamation. Whatever aspect of Christianity—ritual, doctrinal, or ethical—was to take root in a particular African society, its relation to Western Christianity had to be investigated, and dynamic equivalents had to be found.

(3) *Assimilation and Christianization*. Assimilation, according to Kaplan, took place when a Christian ritual was given African meanings; Christianization was the opposite direction: an African ritual was given Christian meaning. Both directions are significant, since the end product was always a merger of old and new.

Kaplan’s typology is helpful in that it introduces a valuable set of terminology. Still, one observation should be added. The many African *theologies of inculturation* constitute attempts on a theoretical level to deal with culture change from a Christian point of view. Yet in the real life of African Christians, “spontaneous Africanization” (Droogers 1977, 452–454) has always been taking place and resulted in practices and persuasions that did not necessarily match with the ideas that theologians developed. Thus, even the amalgamation of cultures could lead to a wide range of different results.

## 7. Conclusion

There are several insights that can be derived from the discussion of African Christian responses to culture change.

### 1. *The strict and the soft positions*

The three strict positions were certainly naïve to some extent, for they assumed that one can either “make a complete break with the past” or uphold tradition by perpetuating it or create a novel culture altogether. Still, their very naïveté at times helped to actually change society, prevent change, or create a distinct subculture. Whether the result of these dynamics was always what their originators intended is another question, for culture always changes, which means that even to preserve the old, change is necessary.

The soft positions resembled one another in that they were more realistic and they allowed for some compromise. Naturally they were majority positions, but even in the last option, which seems to be the most balanced, actual implementation always necessitated debate. It is not surprising, therefore, that several “amalgamation strategies” can be distinguished.

### 2. *The variety of responses*

Most striking in the discussion of African Christian attitudes to culture change is the diversity of attitudes that developed in the name of Christ. What David Maxwell argues for missionaries is also true for African Christians:

nineteenth-century missionaries were as diverse as their social sources and theologies. What is particularly challenging about work on the missionary encounter is the combination of a number of shifting cultural contexts. Ultimately these differing equations produce very different patterns of Christianisation (Maxwell 2006, 385).

While European and American agents of culture change promoted a variety of attitudes, African Christians themselves multiplied this variety once more. Yet Christianity was not only used by the people for their aims; the new religion also changed them in ways that they did not fully anticipate; thus, the different responses to culture change could develop dynamics of their own.

### 3. *The history of African Christianity as history of ideas*

African church historiography has passed through several phases—missionary history, mission history, nationalist critiques of mission history, and emphases on the religious aspects of African church history as well as on Africans as agents of history. A perspective that needs to receive more emphasis is a historiography of African Christianity that assembles a serious history of ideas. This essay with its outline of attitudes towards culture change is, of course, only a very limited contribution to such a historiographical approach. Still, similar to recent studies in other parts of the world (cf., e.g., Robbins 2004), a more in-depth study of the history of African Christian thinking on cultural issues, both in particular regions

and in comparative perspective, would further reveal the importance of ethics as an issue in history, cultural studies, and anthropology.

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Originally published as:

Höschele, Stefan. "Culture Change and Christianity in Africa." In Johannes Hartlapp and Stefan Höschele, eds. *Geschichte, Gesellschaft, Gerechtigkeit: Festschrift für Baldur Pfeiffer*. Berlin: Frank & Timme, 2007, 127–139.

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